

FEATURE ARTICLE

Writing Rocks at St Leonards

I have a passion for writing as I feel I can express my emotions and thoughts through a piece of writing. Writing makes me happy and relaxed and it calms me. When I am writing I take myself into my writing and let my imagination run wild.

Dylan 11 years

Writing is always a thing you can do forever and never get bored as there are so many types of writing and there are so many interesting things you can write about.

Liam 12 years



These thoughts are a reflection of the passion and engagement the students at St Leonards have in writing as a result of a revitalised whole-school approach.

St Leonards is a primary school of 300 students on the fringes of the regional centre of Launceston, Tasmania. Half of the students are supported by student assistance. Over the past two-and-a-half years consistent expectations in the school in relation to literacy teaching have been developed through a strong professional learning focus managed by a school team. Staff agreed that whilst students had a good use of conventions they tended to write in a long-winded way rather than short and sharp. Overall, writing lacked creativity and children could select a limited number of text forms.

After hearing about writers' notebooks at a local ALEA Conference presentation an action research team was formed. They trialled this strategy in their classrooms, reflected on their practice and motivated other teachers in

the school. A commitment to a whole-school approach was gained through a staff survey.

Questions included:

- What are the strengths of our students in terms of literacy?
- What are our weaknesses?
- What resources do we need to support our literacy program?
- Would you value a focus of using quality literature?
- What support do you need to improve literacy outcomes for students?

St Leonards whole school approach to writing is underpinned by six throughlines.

- Our whole school community will have a positive attitude to literacy learning.
- First Steps resources will be a scaffold for supporting teachers in developing their literacy pedagogy.
- Writers' notebooks will be used as a way of unpacking ideas as seeds for writing.
- Teachers will explicitly teach a range of text forms to enable children to self select for a variety of purposes.
- Children will become strategic spellers drawing upon a range of spelling knowledge.
- Quality literature is a critical resource and will be used to develop competent and creative literacy users.



The key to engaging students in writing is the writers' notebook – personalised in Grades 3 to 6 and whole class in prep to Grade 2.

Notebooks are filled with thoughts, ideas, observations and things we wonder about, hope for or want to know more about. It is a place for students to collect observations, ideas, feelings, facts and lists. Students can include sketches, photos, artefacts, newspaper headlines.

Children place their idea (or seed) into their notebook, do some exploratory thinking and then shape their idea into a topic or text type. Children are encouraged to use a range of scaffolds to support their unpacking of ideas.

Some examples include:

- **Think Feel Wonder** – What do I think about?
What do I feel? What do I wonder?
- **Describing Wheel** – Add describing words and phrases about your topic/picture/headline in each spoke of the wheel
- **Five W's** – What happened? Who was there?
Why did it happen? When did it happen?
Where did it happen?

Critical to the success of this approach is the explicit teaching of different text forms. Our students are very articulate about the purposes of writing and the forms they can take.

Each student in Grades 3 to 6 has a personalised Writer's Gift – a celebration of published work.

We are currently reflecting and reviewing our spelling approach with the aim of more consistency across the school around

1. **Visual strategies** – being able to think about and remember the way a word 'looks' helps you spell the word correctly.
2. **Sound strategies** – using a knowledge of 'sounds' and 'sound patterns' to help you spell
3. **Meaning strategies** – being able to think about the meaning of a word can help you spell correctly
4. **Inquiry strategies** – being able to use the spelling resources around you to help you spell correctly.

We are encouraging our students to analyse their own spelling using a range of knowledge.

A whole-school approach to develop young writers who are engaged, are taught the craft of writing and

can select a range of text forms creates a buzz in our school.

The writer's notebook provides the seeds for writing, writing workshops empower students to think collaboratively and the writer's gift is the source for celebration.

Jane Bovill, Principal, St Leonards Primary

Acknowledgement

The staff at St Leonards Primary acknowledge the work of Ivanhoe Grammar Junior School (Victoria), led by consultant and author Debbie Sukarna for their inspiration and guidance in setting up our whole-school approach.

Footnote

St Leonards was the 2007 Tasmanian National Excellence in Literacy winner.

